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ABSTRACT

The use of children's literature in the classroom can greatly enhance the core curriculum by supporting children's cognition, language, personality, social, aesthetic, and creative development. Preservice teachers often have difficulty conceptualizing a style of literature presentation that will provide optimum learning-stimulation, however, and the EXCEL (Expanding Children's Experiences through Literature) approach was conceived in response to this need. This three-pronged approach is aimed at drawing upon and expanding children's experiences, increasing students' interactions with oral and written language, and developing students' interests in literature while actively engaging them in literature experiences. The steps involved in EXCEL are (1) a prereading activity; (2) the reading, telling, or dramatization of a story; and (3) a postreading activity. EXCEL has proven very effective with children from preschool age through sixth grade and with normal as well as exceptional and multicultural populations. If children are to discover the joy of involvement in the world of books, it is important to make maximal use of their literature experiences. Only after finding excitement in books can children be expected to become more than nominally involved in reading. (AEW)

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The Storytellers are Here:

Using the EXCEL Approach to Involving Children in Literature

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Abstract

The use of children's literature in the classroom can greatly enhance the core curriculum which is being presented. Books are available which can expand students' experiences in language development, social studies, science, and physical development as well as promote student interest in reading. The following article presents an approach to using children's literature in the classroom to promote optimum development of students' appreciation and involvement in literature.

Author Notes

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Introduction

Using the EXCEL Approach to Involving Children in Literature

The world of books can open new avenues for experiences, understandings, insights, appreciation, and values for children. In order to be able to benefit from literature, children must first be guided into this exciting world. Most often children are introduced to stories before they reach school through parents and/or others who read to them. Upon entering school, their introduction to literature can be greatly expanded through the teacher's preparation of a literature curriculum (Huck, 1977; Norton, 1985; and Glazer, 1986).

Literature can be used as a means to support children's development in the areas of cognition, language, personality, social mores, aesthetics, and creativity (Glazer, 1986). It can be used to extend content area materials and has been shown to be effective as a tool for bibliotherapy and in helping children develop their awareness and sensitivity concerning handicapping conditions (Huck, 1979).

In order to fully benefit from literature experiences, schema theory would suggest that children's prior experiences and background information need to be activated just as is necessary for comprehension in the reading process to occur (Anderson and Pearson, 1984). If children lack necessary background information for understanding concepts presented in a particular story, then their listening comprehension or

full understanding of what is being read to them could be impaired. Thus, the potential benefits to be acquired as a result of using literature in the classroom will be reduced, as Smith (1985) suggests that it is the nonvisual information which a reader brings to the story which is essential for comprehension to take place.

Preparing Children for Literature

Literature presentations should be made in a relaxed environment which will help promote the development of positive attitudes toward these listening experiences. In working with preservice teachers, the question of how best to provide literature experiences for a variety of audiences including multi-cultural and exceptional children is ever present. While methods of enhancing literature for children and activities to extend literature experiences are to be found in numerous sources, pre-service teachers experience difficulty in conceptualizing a style of presentation which will provide optimal stimulation for learning to occur. The EXCEL (Expanding Children's Experiences Through Literature) approach was conceived in response to this need.

EXCEL is a three-pronged approach aimed at (a) drawing upon and expanding children's experiences; (b) increasing students' interactions with oral and written language; and (c) developing and promoting students' interests in literature while actively engaging in literature experiences. It consists of three steps which provide a comfortable format

for presenting literature to small or large groups of children with "guided participation" (Rogoff, 1984) by adults. As described by Rogoff (1984), guided participation is used by adults during times of informal learning and entails adjusting the adults' interactions with children and "structuring children's environments and activities in ways that provide support for learning (p.28)." Guided participation can be either implicit, such as a mother teaching a daughter how to make bread by having the daughter repeat the steps with her own dough, or it can be more explicit and planned as in the case of EXCEL.

The steps involved in EXCEL are: (a) the preparation or prereading activity, (b) the reading, telling, or dramatization of a story, and (c) the post-reading or concluding activity. As it has become common for teachers to direct reading instruction using three steps consisting of a pre-reading activity, reading for a purpose, and discussion and review (Harris and Smith, 1986), transfer to this three-step approach for Children's Literature is greatly facilitated. Each of the steps will be explored in turn below.

Preparation or Pre-Reading Activity

A very important aspect of EXCEL is that of activating prior knowledge to prepare children for the literature experiences they will have. In reading stories to children, many times we neglect to help our listeners become prepared

for their listening experiences. Instead, we jump headlong and assume that the listeners will be able and willing to follow along. However, if children have never seen a wombat and know nothing about the unique variety of animals living in Australia, they will not be able to fully appreciate a story such as One Wooley Wombat (Trinca and Argent, 1982). It is only through preparation for the story through discussion about animals and the variety of Australian animals, giving attention to the appearance and the habitat of the wombat, that the listeners can truly appreciate the story that will follow.

The same is true of a story such as Blueberries for Sal (McCloskey, 1948). If children have never seen nor tasted blueberries, enjoyed blueberry muffins or other goods made with blueberries, they will not truly appreciate Sal's enjoyment in picking and eating blueberries and how she could so easily become involved in her blueberry picking. But if analogies can be drawn by teachers to the taste and textures of other types of berries, or to the enjoyment of picking other types of fruits such as chokecherries picked by Native Americans in the Northwest, then children can begin to integrate their own past experiences with the experiences being presented in the story. In this way students can draw upon schemata they possess in order to acquire new knowledge as is suggested by Rumelhart and Ortonoy (1977).

Storytelling, the Second Step

After listeners have been prepared for the story, the second step, that of actually reading, telling, or dramatizing a story, becomes an easier task as the attention of the listeners has already been gained. During the storytelling, visual aids such as flannel boards, puppets of all kinds, and drawings of the characters and action taking place can be used to help gravitate the listener's attention. With children who are mentally handicapped, a simple technique of giving students concrete objects to hold or to wear during the telling of a story which relate to the story helps to focus their attention. For example, in telling the story Jennie's Hats (Keats, 1966), children were given their choice of a variety of hats to wear during the telling of the story. Not only did they compare their hats to each other's, but they also related their hats to the hat worn by the main character in the story. With the story of Androcles and the Lion (Galdone, 1970), children were given either lion manes (made out of paper plates with the middle cut out and tissue paper "hair" around the outside) to put on their faces like masks or mouse ears to wear on their heads. During appropriate points in the storytelling, children who were "lions" voluntarily roared while those who were mice dutifully squeaked, again without prompting.

Other children have enjoyed using finger puppets representing characters in the story while the story is being

told. They have held their puppets up during the times that their characters are involved in the story action. Holding pictures of characters or of story settings has also helped to hold students' attention during the telling of various stories. Children can pick their favorite characters in a story presentation and follow the action with that character. The emphasis here is on getting the children to actively participate in their listening experiences.

Post-Reading or Concluding Activities

In the Seneca Indian legend of the "Talking Stone" (deWitt, 1979), the story of Orphan Boy is related. Orphan Boy receives the stories of his people from Gus-Tah-Ote, the Spirit of the Rock, in order that the stories may be retold to his people and that they may know of their history. In this legend, Orphan Boy places in a pouch some small objects which will help him recall the stories he has heard and enable him to retell them to his people.

According to Brown (1977), "several years of formal schooling seems to be necessary before the emergence of spontaneous attempts to organize, rehearse, categorize, etc. for the purpose of remembering (p.248)." For some children with special needs, that process might take longer. It is also known that text structure or story grammar differs from culture to culture (Educational Equity, 1986). It is for these reasons that the third step of EXCEL incorporates this aspect of collecting or creating objects to extend the story

presentation and to help children recall the stories they have heard.

Teachers decide upon activities they can do with children in a reasonable amount of time which will allow them to create, illustrate, or collect something reminiscent of the story they have heard. This could entail making something used by the main characters, such as a board game like that used by Judy and Peter in the story Jumanji (Van Allsburg, 1981). Older children can make their own instruments after exploring a book like Jug bands and handmade music: a creative approach to music theory and the instruments (Collier, 1973). After reading a poem about animals from Roar and More (Kuskin, 1956), younger children can make their own animals by drawing them on paper and coloring them, cutting animals out of construction paper and making their animals into a mobile for the classroom, or by creating clay animals which can be dried and perhaps later placed in a kiln for firing.

Puppetry is very useful in post-reading activities. Children love to make their own puppets of characters from stories and then to retell the stories using the puppets. Paper bag puppets, glove puppets, stick puppets and finger puppets as well as cloth, papier mache, and sock puppets are all favorites with children and can be produced at relatively low costs.

After reading poetry, children can create their own poems following patterns they have heard or involving the same or their own choice of subject matters. These can then be shared with the class and displayed for all to enjoy. Students also enjoy making class collections of poems that can be put on the shelves and read during free reading periods. Poems can be accompanied by illustrations or the creation of objects through various artistic media. Music can also be incorporated to accompany poetry readings by students.

There are many resources available for seasonal activities which may be used following a story with a seasonal theme. At Halloween, children have made their own masks or jack-o-lanterns after listening to Halloween stories. It was interesting for preservice teachers to see that the types of masks produced by our Native American children depicted animals such as the wolf and the bear that are important in their culture.

During Christmas or Chanukah, ornaments and/or Chanukah gifts can be made; various games can be made and played that have a seasonal theme. Spring provides a wonderful opportunity to plant seeds in paper cups after reading books about growing things, such as How to make things grow (Wickens and Tuey, 1972).

The types of activities which can be done with children are only limited by one's imagination. Sources of additional

activities can be found in Huck (1977) and Norton (1985) among others.

Children's Responses

The use of the EXCEL Approach has proven to be very effective with children from preschool age through sixth grade where it has been used with normal as well as exceptional and multi-cultural populations. The three-step approach has been easy for teachers to follow as they try to make their presentations interesting and engaging for their audiences.

The enthusiasm with which presentations have been received by the children themselves has been the most rewarding aspect of using the EXCEL Approach. Our preservice teachers have been dubbed "The Storytellers" by the children, and the words "The Storytellers are Here!" reverberate in school halls as they have approached classrooms where their audiences awaited in anticipation. One Kindergarten teacher who works with Native American children reported that when her students were told they would be having Story Hour one day in February, they proceeded to relate to her the stories they had heard during the previous Fall and the activities they had done after listening to the stories.- Other teachers have relayed similar stories.

A complete illustration of the approach can be found in Chart 1 with suggestions for Stone Soup by Marcia Brown. If children can be turned on to literature through this type of

guided participation by adults, the chances of enriching their lives and motivating their interests in reading and learning become much greater. If children are to discover the wonder and the joy of involvement in the world of books, it is important to make maximal use of their literature experiences. Only after finding excitement in books can we expect children to voluntarily become more than nominally involved in their reading experiences.

Preparation or Pre-Reading Activity

Stone Soup (1947) by Marcia Brown

-Talk about how it feels to be hungry and what you need to do when you're hungry.

-Ask children about what kind of soup they like to eat.

-Allow students to sample beef vegetable soup (this is especially important if children have not had vegetable and meat soup before).

-Talk about sharing and what it means to share.

Storytelling Presentation

-this story would be suited to a flannel board presentation, puppetry, or dramatization.

Post-Reading or Concluding Activities

-Write a recipe for "Stone Soup" and prepare the soup if possible with each student contributing.

-Discuss and list reasons why the soup in the story was so delicious when everyone pitched into make it.

-Decide on a group project and have each student contribute something to the project. Allow students to take their contributions home.

Chart No. 1.

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